

Diversity Statement

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As someone with considerable social privilege, my responsibility in the promotion of a more just, equitable, and inclusive society is to act in response to expressed, felt need. Doing so requires cultivating an environment where people feel safe expressing their needs and struggles sincerely, listening with humility, and supporting them according to their express wishes.

Expressed, Felt Need. Padre Greg of the San Lucas Tolimán mission in Guatemala taught me a wonderful phrase which, to me, encapsulates the importance of listening. Padre Greg described to us volunteers his story arriving in Guatemala as a young priest with all sorts of plans to improve the lives of his parishioners, only to learn the difficult lesson that his ideas were not always the best. Over the years, he acquired the wisdom to act only in response to “expressed, felt need,” meaning need which is spoken openly, not guessed at, and which is sincerely felt, not based on the expectations of the powerful.

As a Peace Corps volunteer in Kazakhstan, I witnessed extreme versions of institutional failures to listen. For example, an NGO provided the elementary school I worked in with an expensive computer lab. When the NGO representative visited (once, for a single day), the lab was unlocked, and a show lesson was put on for their benefit. Otherwise, the computers sat entirely unused for many reasons, including for fear of their being broken, for lack of teachers to teach computer skills, and for lack of time in the government-mandated curriculum.

As an example of listening that I consider successful, I was asked by the Statistics Department at UC Berkeley to serve on a student panel on increasing diversity and representation in the department. Those of us on the panel had clear ideas of what would help, but, by their nature, such panels usually consist of graduate students who are already succeeding. Recognizing this bias in ourselves, we took it upon ourselves to conduct open-ended interviews with all the grad students in the department to ask what would improve the UC Berkeley grad school experience, especially for under-represented minorities and women. The results were eye-opening. None of the panel’s original ideas (such as a student paper seminar) were very popular, but there was broad and vocal support for other reforms (such as clearer requirements for the qualifying exam), and . The work to collate responses not only exposed weakness in our own assumptions, it also signaled to the department that we were serious enough about diversity to do a considerable amount of work, and provided numerical support to bolster our recommendations.

Taking action. University faculty can take action to promote equity and justice within the university in at least two qualitatively distinct ways. One is through personal relationships, such as via mentorship, advising, and teaching. The other is through official programs, such as departmental outreach or diversity events.

I believe that personal relationships are the best opportunity for real social change, and university faculty have the opportunity to forge many meaningful relationships with students. Everything begins with listening, and professors can often provide a lot of help simply by acting as empathetic sounding boards for struggling students. The principal factor that is negatively associated with URM dropout is a community, and professors can help ensure that students, especially under-represented students, feel they have somewhere helpful to turn when they struggle. For example, one of the initiatives that came out of the aforementioned UC Berkeley diversity panel was a strengthened student mentorship program, which I actively participated in as a mentor.

Finally, I believe that official programs to promote diversity, such as department panels, outreach programs, and diversity events are best led by the group whom they are intended to serve. However, the privileged can often play a useful subordinate role. In response to the George Marcy sexual harassment scandal at UC Berkeley, two female PhD students in statistics wanted to organize a department-wide “diversity lunch” to discuss issues related to sexism in the statistics field, and they asked me to help. Importantly, the impetus and key decisions were entirely theirs. I could of course provide material help (emailing, gathering resources, presenting, etc.). But my active presence served an additional purpose: to signal that sexism was not simply a “women’s issue,” but a problem that affects and should engage everyone.